THE SPY WHO CAME BACK IN THE THAW

By Steve Goldstein
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WASHINGTON — The spy wore plaid.

Glen plaid, of course, the suit tastefully complemented by a yellow print tie for the perfect spring day, and his trademark pale pink horn-rim eyeglasses that softened the impassive, barely lined, lightly tanned face. It was hard to imagine that *this* William E. Colby, former spymaster of the Central Intelligence Agency, was the same man who once ran the infamous Phoenix assassination program in Vietnam, the man one agency colleague once called "a real sonofabitch."

Now that it has become fashionable for spies to come in from the Cold War, Colby next month will make his first trip to the Soviet Union, a place that occupied his time and imagination for many of the nearly 30 years he worked for The Company.

Colby always wanted to go to Mother Russia; in fact he almost tagged along on one of Henry Kissinger's trips in the '70s. After his three-year run as director ended with President Gerald Ford's administration-wide housecleaning in 1975, Colby shied away from traveling to Moscow as a private citizen.

"I didn't want to embarrass them [the Soviets], more than anything," Colby said. "How do they handle a former director of CIA? It's embarrassing for them, very difficult."

We hope you like your accommodations, sir. We will answer your every request — simply say it aloud in your room. Someone will be along to taste your food.

Now times have changed, and *perestroika* has made the unthinkable doable. Colby has been invited as part of an annual program run in Moscow by the New York-based Center for War, Peace and the News Media. His appearance will be as part of a panel arranged by the semi-official Novosti news agency, an organization the CIA has termed a front for the KGB.

"I'm not an expert," Colby said with a thin smile when asked about Novosti's relationship with the Soviet intelligence organization. But he displayed an expert's knowledge of arms negotiations between the two superpowers in an hour-long interview, and his reading on the Soviet Union had obviously not been confined to his bookshelf editions of Mikhail S. Gorbachev's *Perestroika* and spy thrillers by Deighton and le Carre.

"Gorbachev is like the little boy who noticed that the emperor's new clothes were not anything at all," he mused. "He looked at weapons systems and decided the money was being wasted. He looked at the economy and said it didn't work. I don't think he's a visionary. I think he's a very pragmatic and practical fellow.

"He's engaged in the most difficult political operation in the world," declared Colby. "It's fairly hard to hold on to power, it's a little harder to seize power, but the hardest thing of all is to let power go."

Colby was no less unequivocal in his view of the modern-day KGB. "I think that [former Soviet leader and KGB head Yuri] Andropov did an exceptionally good job of increasing the professionalism of its officers," he said. "They still have their thugs but they began to recruit the best and the brightest out of the Soviet university system. They taught them how to drink Scotch and how not to try to recruit a foreign agent in the first five minutes.

"Also they developed a whole analytical function," Colby added. "For a long time they thought the only one of our newspapers worth reading was the Daily Worker."

Colby said he was not surprised to see the Soviets "copy us" by developing a series of institutes for studying various countries.

"Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I guess," Colby said primly.

Manners, manners. Triathlete-trim Colby, 70, attended Princeton and Columbia University Law School, and his Georgetown home, a yellow and white townhouse not far from Oak Hill Cemetery, is a model of decoration and decorum. The house is done in pastels and is accented with Oriental art and pieces from the Caribbean, where Colby's wife, Sally Shelton, served as ambassador to several countries, including Barbados and Grenada.

Shelton, who is accompanying her husband to the Soviet Union for his week-long visit, appeared for a firm handshake but mostly was visible racing up and down the stairs as she juggled telephones and tradespeople.

On a wall, framed photos of Colby with various Vietnamese and U.S. military types are interspersed with shots of Shelton with fellow Democrat, Michael Dukakis among them. At one point, Colby took a call and spoke in flat but effective Italian, a language he learned while stationed in Rome by the CIA in the early '50s.

In October, Colby and another former CIA administrator participated in a conference on terrorism in California sponsored by the Rand Corp. Also present were Valentin Zvevbenkov and Fedor Sherbak, two ex-KGB officials. The new KGB chief, Vladimir Kryuchkov, has suggested that there is room for cooperation between the two spy networks in this heyday of *glasnost*.

"Maybe someday," allowed Colby. "I think both sides would be a little cautious about getting involved too quickly."

Of course, a George Smiley-and-Karla-type meeting between Colby and Kryuchkov could be fascinating. Given the chance, what mysteries would Colby like to unravel?

"I'd like to know the truth about Alger Hiss," he replied, mentioning the former State Department official who was convicted of lying about passing secrets to a Communist spy ring in 1950. "I'd like to know just how effective Kim Philby and that gang was. I'd like to know more about the Rosenbergs."

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1953 for selling nuclear secrets to the Soviets, and their case has stirred controversy ever since.

It has been suggested that in this post-Cold War era, intelligence-gath-

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ering is even more important than it was 20 years ago. Colby agrees, saying that when the Soviet Union had a monolithic government run by Stalin or Brezhnev, information was difficult to obtain but decision-making was static or formal.

"With the emergence of factions and other competing forces, the collection is easier now," he said, "but you have to winnow through all the chaff to get at the main elements. So today it's a bit more confusing."

Colby stressed that the main component of intelligence-gathering, as always, was analyzing raw information rather than what is commonly understood as espionage. He acknowledged, though, that technology had completely changed the game, enabling the CIA to examine things "with a sweep and precision you didn't have before."

Exhibit 1 might be the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, the eight-story brick antenna for the Kremlin. Colby said many people who served in the Soviet Union had become so accustomed to being bugged that they had been lax in taking the proper precautions in the building of the new embassy.

"That's why we build bubbles," he said, referring to the super-secure rooms-within-a-room. Then he told a story of being in a bubble at the embassy in Romania, "but we were on the air anyway." Seems the deputy chief of mission had sent his shoes to be repaired and they came back with a bug in the heel.

Spying is 75 percent footwork.

Evidence on his bookshelves notwithstanding, Colby said he wasn't much for spy fiction.

"For me, they are unreal," he said. "Too much derring-do and everything works out in a nice, ordered manner. Life is more complicated."

Colby's public life began with the Office of Strategic Services, America's World War II intelligence organization, for which he twice parachuted behind German lines to work with French and Norwegian resistance forces. (Derring-do, anyone?) He joined the CIA in 1950 and worked at the U.S. Embassies in Stockholm, Rome and Saigon, the last as ambassador, and was head of The Company's Far East division from 1963 to 1968.

As head of Phoenix, the brutal "pacification" program — in which suspected Viet Cong sympathizers were tortured and assassinated — Colby earned a reputation as a tough guy, a reputation he lost, ironically, after becoming CIA director in 1973, when his main task was cleaning up the agency "skeletons." Since returning to the private sector in 1976, Colby has picked up his law practice and worked as a consultant to various companies.

Colby's itinerary in the Soviet Union calls for arrival in Leningrad before going on to Moscow. He wants to see the people, how they live, how they look, and observe the crowds. Somebody, doubtless, will offer to swap him caviar for his black loafers.

Given the adverse propaganda about the CIA still fed to the Soviet public, Colby may find himself with a tough audience. "I'll explain that we were involved in covert activities during the Cold War, but if there is no Cold War there is no particular need for it," he said.

Will he accept an invitation to a Russian home?

"I'd accept, but I'd take someone else," he said, offering a bit of tradecraft. "I'd still stick to my basic rule that you don't do it alone."

Colby, lawyer-like and reserved, said he's not the type to get too excited about things, so all he will say about the mid-May trip is that "I'm interested." He will take a camera, and a good guidebook and hope not to be noticed more than any other American tourist.

And isn't *that* what spying is all about?